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A NOVELIST OF THE HOUR.

PERHAPS one could not better begin a review of Mr. George Gissing's latest novel, "The Whirlpool," than by describing its physiological effect upon the reader at its close: a faint, infrequent pulse, a sensation of depression in the region of the epigastrium, an acrid taste in the mouth. It is an undeniably able book, depressing because of its very naturalness, its long-drawn, remorseless analysis of selfish and worldly motives and passions. The "whirlpool" is the social vortex, wherein a man becomes a wolf to a man, a woman a wolverene to a woman. The question suggests itself: Is evolution, with its materialistic theory of morals, bringing forth its generation? Is an education without religion, a view of life that dispenses with all reference to God, bringing in its revenges? Are we face to face with Messrs. Huxley and Spencer's race?

If every generation leaves and must leave a record of itself in verse, equally must it in fiction also, and in Mr. Gissing's work our generation may see itself photographed. The book is startlingly modern, and its reader may realize and repeat his father's sensations when reading a novel of George Eliot's, fresh from the press. Its style, dry, businesslike, quite unimaginative, is modern, and so is its dialogue; no more of the studied compositions, the choice vocabulary, beautifully balanced sentences and rounded paragraphs in which people exchanged their ideas "sixty years since," but piecemeal talk, tending to the monosyllabic, fragmentary, with unfinished sentences and questions of artful suggestion. Modern too are its environment and problems—the harsh, heart-wearying roar of city life, problems of marriage and heredity, and above all the portentous "servant question." Pathos there is none, though there is plenty of "sordid tragedy," and the humor, infrequent and flitting, never moves to laughter and hardly to a smile; its quality is *saturnine*, and such, in a word, seems to be the author's mood. Its plot inheres in the degeneracy

of a woman's character, and unfolds the misery of worldly life, its debasing suspicions, its turbid, ignoble current. The twofold crisis, a musical triumph and a murder, occurs at the end of the second part (correspondent to the third act of a play), and after it the climax seems weak, inept; but the author would reply that it is the ineptitude of life. The heroine's character is one of subtle, all-engrossing selfishness. One of the prominent figures is a type of primitive man caught in the toils of civilization—the craft of women. A female figure in the background is a parody of the failure of the conscientious ideal, the moralism, of George Eliot. The musical world is put in the pillory; the emptiness of esthetic consolations is exposed; and “art” is shown to eventuate in vanity and vexation of spirit. The author himself is impersonal, fateful; too dispassionate to be called pessimistic, and if cynical, his cynicism is veiled in extreme literalness; his only mood that can be plainly divined is one of weary indifference to and contempt of the life he depicts. The personal equation so apparent in writers of realistic fiction—in Thackeray, notably; the romantic element that survived in George Eliot; the eccentricity of Mr. Meredith; Mr. Hardy's rebellious spirit, and Mrs. Ward's didacticism—have all been eliminated from the work of Mr. Gissing, in whom accordingly the realistic movement in English fiction would seem to have reached its goal. And the dispassionate conclusion is, that life for this world only is unspeakably hideous in character and consequences. So it is, perhaps, that the book does open, at its close, the old-fashioned way out: wholesome domestic life, in the country, pervaded by the influence of the Church.

Let us illustrate in detail the points thus rapidly summarized.

Mr. Gissing's method in description is objective, the record of a sequence of visual impressions, as in this interior:

They went out into the hall, where a dim light through colored glass illumined a statue in terra cotta, some huge engravings, the massive antlers of an elk, and furniture in carved oak.

Emotional and figurative qualities are scrupulously ex-

cluded, and the distortion consequent upon viewing objects through a poetic atmosphere, or haze of temperament, is avoided. Rarely do we find as much infusion of sentiment, and that severely restrained, as the following picture of the hero's departure from his bachelor's quarters—in which, moreover, a lurid light is thrown upon the problem of domestic service:

On the eve of his marriage day he stood in the dismantled rooms, at once joyful and heavy at heart. His books were hidden in a score of packing-cases, labeled, ready to be sent away. In spite of open windows, the air was still charged with dust; since the packing began every one concerned in it had choked and coughed incessantly; on the bare floor foot-steps were impressed in a thick flocky deposit. These rooms could have vied with any in London for supremacy of filthiness. Yet here he had known hours of still contentment; here he had sat with friends congenial, and heard the walls echo their hearty laughter; here he had felt at home—here his youth had died.

Only in passages descriptive of his ideal—the peace and beauty of country life—is our author lifted off his feet; he is guilty of poetry, both of sentiment and syntax, in the following:

It was in the town, yet nothing townlike. No sooty smother hung above the housetops and smirched the garden leafage; no tramp of crowds, no clatter of hot-wheel traffic, sounded from the streets hard by. But at hours familiar, bidding to task or pleasure or repose, the music of the grey belfries floated overhead; a voice from the old time, an admonition of mortality in strains sweet to the ear of childhood. Harvey had but to listen, and the days of long ago came back to him. Above all, when at evening rang the curfew. Stealing apart to a bowered corner of the garden, he dreamed himself into the vanished years, when curfew-time was bedtime, and a hand with gentle touch led him from his play to that long sweet slumber which is the child's new birth.

It is time to introduce the characters of the story, and this we will do in the author's own words, and thereby illustrate his method of personal description. He certainly succeeds in setting his people clearly before us, with strict economy of language. The principal figures are brought upon the scene at the very outset. The hero

had a shaven chin, a weathered complexion, thick brown hair; the penumbra of middle age had touched his countenance, softening here and there a line which told of temperament in excess.

Carnaby was a fair example of the well-bred, well-fed Englishman—tall, brawny, limber, not uncomely, with a red neck, a powerful jaw, and a

keen eye. Something more of repose, of self-possession, and a slightly more intellectual brow would have made him the best type of conquering, civilizing Briton.

Mr. Redgrave had thin hair, but a robust moustache and a short peaked beard; his complexion was a trifle sallow.

The ladies are not as distinctly seen: Sybil Carnaby, an inscrutable woman, who could look and smile at one without conveying the faintest suggestion of her actual thought. and the heroine, Alma Frothingham, whose features suggested neither force of intellect nor originality of character; but they had beauty and something more. She stood a fascination, an allurements to the masculine sense.

These, however, are but superficial considerations; our author's strength is in his psychology, his exposure of the silent thoughts of his characters, their half-concealed, half-revealed motives, their manner of expression.

Characteristic of the dialogue is its significant triviality, its scrappy, commonplace, inartistic nature (faithful to modern habit), yet charged with meaning, pregnant with weal or woe to the personages involved. We open at random:

"I oughtn't to have given you this trouble," said Sibyl, "but perhaps you would rather see me here"—

"Yes—oh yes—it was much better"—

"Sit down, dear. We won't talk of wretched things, will we? If I could have been of any use to you"—

"I was so afraid you would never"—

"Oh, you know me better than that."

A favorite bit of feminine slang is the expression "early Victorian," equivalent to "anachronistic," used to ridicule, in a ladylike way, any conservative idea or prejudice—such as that a wife should obey her husband. Mr. Gissing does not seem to repine, as Thackeray did, that he cannot reproduce men's talk realistically; some of his men say "Damn," and treat each other to whiskey and water; and doubtless no sensible person will complain of omissions in that line.

As examples of his sardonic humor let us take the following, at the expense of the climate of London:

Next morning the weather was fine; that is to say, one could read without artificial light, and no rain fell;

at "society's" expense:

Couples and groups paused to talk near him, and whenever he caught a sentence it was the merest chatter, meaningless repetition of common-places which, but for habit, must have been an unutterable weariness to the least intelligent of mortals;

and at the expense of his heroine, and her musical coterie:

Alma had not the habit of telling falsehoods to her husband, but she did it remarkably well— . . . the years had matured her, endowing her with superior self-possession, and a finish of style in dealing with these little difficulties.

Alma was become a very fluent talker, and her voice had the quality which fixes attention. At luncheon, whilst half a dozen persons lent willing ear, she compared Sarasate's playing of Beethoven's Concerto with that of Joachim, and declared that Sarasate's *cadenza* in the first movement, though marvelous for technical skill, was not at all in the spirit of the work. The influential writer applauded, drawing her on to fresh displays of learning, taste, eloquence. She had a great deal to say about somebody's "technique of the left hand," of somebody else's "tonal effects," of a certain pianist's "warmth of touch." It was truly a musical gathering; each person at table had some exquisite phrase to contribute. The hostess, who played no instrument but doted upon all, was of opinion that an executant should "aim at mirroring his own nature in his interpretation of a tone-poem;" whereupon another lady threw out remarks on "subjective interpretation," confessing her preference for a method purely "objective." The influential critic began to talk about Liszt, with whom he declared that he had been on intimate terms; he grew fervent over the master's rhapsodies, with their "clanging rhythm and dithyrambic fury."

Our author, it is plain, is a keen and critical observer, who has little mercy upon "the artificial ugliness of affectation."

The occupations and reverses of his characters are those of the present day: the story opens with the far-reaching failure of a speculative enterprise; people grow haggard over the thought and the necessity of reinvesting at a reduced rate of interest; one invests in a bicycle-factory, and is involved in a suit over a patent; another converts photography, once his pastime, into a means of livelihood; still another is an overworked journalist, who is involved in the above-mentioned failure. Meantime the women are engaged in social duties and esthetics; Sibyl Carnaby is absorbed for a while in investigations in the Italian Renaissance.

In the matter of incident, one remarks an unexpected

likeness to a kind of fiction as different from this as could be imagined—to certain didactic and religious tales, whose authors season their morality, and so excite and hold the attention of careless readers, with a plentiful spice of sensational incident. In “The Whirlpool,” following upon the defalcation, the ruined journalist dies of an overdose of morphia; and there are a burglary, an unequivocal suicide, an improper proposal, a runaway, a case of manslaughter—and the heroine dies through indulgence in a dangerous soporific. Nothing is lacking save a conflagration. The suggestion of vulgar sensation that might naturally be conveyed by such a catalogue would, however, be unfair; for these crises are carefully prepared for, the train of events and states of mind leading up to them is duly elaborated, and they seem to spring naturally and inevitably from the narrative, and to be implicated in it.

The nature of the plot is indicated by the fatalistic symbol of the title. The hero writes: “I feel as if we were all being swept into a ghastly whirlpool which roars over the bottomless pit.” The heroine circles for a while around “the outer edge of the whirlpool” of civilization, and is dragged downward with ever-increasing velocity. Note of time is carefully preserved; the dates of the action are A.D. 1886, 1890–91. The plot hinges upon the long-standing conflict between art and domestic life: Part First ends with a marriage, after the claims of the heroine’s art have been fully discussed and her right to an untrammelled prosecution of them has been freely granted. Thus the tale begins instead of ending with a marriage—an order characteristic of mature fiction. The consequences of this union are the degeneration of her character and the improvement of the hero’s. He has been the surly, headstrong son of a severe father, whom he had feared but never loved; and after a turbulent youth has settled down into a self-pleasing manhood, to which the thought of wedlock and children was repulsive and absurd. From this state of cultured egoism he is drawn by feminine attraction, and is metamorphosed by love and marriage into a most

considerate husband and devoted father. He is humanized by the obligations of the new relation; Alma's nature, on the contrary, deteriorates through indifference to them or subordination of them to her artistic ambition, and through abuse of his indulgence. In this character the purely esthetic temperament, devoid of mental or moral stamina, is ruthlessly dissected. Alma is versatile in talent but volatile in intention, swayed by transient impulses and enthusiasms, dependent upon others' approbation or even flattery for the necessary stimulus to exertion. The only passion by which she is actuated is that of hate of her former friend, Sybil. This latter name is a symbol; its bearer is the problematic character of the book, so designed and left so when all is told. We do not know whether she is innocent, or an incarnation of serpentine wisdom, of dissimulation so profound that it has become her second nature, the law of her life. We are indeed left to imagine that the consuming hatred of a jealous woman has cleared the heroine's vision so that she is enabled "to read the mysterious Sybil with some approach to exactness." The motive of this insane passion is Alma's conviction that Sybil is attempting to detach Cyrus Redgrave from her interests. He is a refined sensualist, a finished man of the world, and the evil genius of the plot; one of his instruments is a Mrs. Strangeways (another symbolic name)—

a lady of perhaps thirty-five, with keen, thin face, and an artificial bloom on her hollow cheeks; rather overdressed, yet not to the point of vulgarity; of figure very well proportioned, slim and lissom. Her voice was a trifle hard, but pleasant; her manner cordial in excess.

Perilous environment this for an undisciplined nature! Alma is determined to use Redgrave's services to the utmost for the furtherance of her artistic triumph, and her suspicion that Sybil is thwarting her in this hurries her into a rash step which proves the occasion of his death, and plunges the Carnabys in disaster—but her hatred falls foiled by her adversary's imperturbable self-control and superior art.

Mr. Gissing is at his best in describing a psychological

crisis, a moment of supreme nervous tension, such as Alma's on the occasion of her public recital. It is an experience sufficiently common to encourage a novice in view of some great ordeal; when friends apprehend stage fright, an extraordinary, luminous collectedness seems to settle upon the victim.

On first stepping forward she could see nothing but a misty expanse of faces; she could not feel the boards she trod upon; yet no sooner had she raised her violin than a glorious sense of power made her forget everything but the music she was to play. She all but laughed with delight. Never had she felt so perfect a mastery of her instrument. She played without effort, and could have played for hours without weariness. Her fellow musicians declared that she was "wonderful."

The style borders upon humor in describing the restraint that society imposes upon expression of natural feeling, the counterfeit of a Christian grace that the civilized world inculcates:

"I don't take offense, Mrs. Strangeways," Alma answered, with a slight laugh to cover her uneasiness. "It's so old-fashioned."

Mrs. Strangeways

was an older woman, and had learnt the injudiciousness of impulsive behavior.

Alma "thought it better not to be too abrupt with" her musical adviser. And her husband, having to postpone for a few hours what would have been a severe reply to an unreasonable request of hers, "grew more tolerant" of her feelings.

In conclusion, the degeneracy of the central character is exhibited by a few infallible signs: the self-pity of the wrongdoer—"Alma had begun to compassionate herself—a dangerous situation"—her opening a letter addressed to her husband, and the unfounded and degrading suspicions excited by something she read in it—and finally, the depth of degeneracy in a wife and mother, a regret that she had not, in her salad days, profited by Redgrave's dishonorable proposal.

The "servant question" forces itself repeatedly into prominence in the course of the narrative; its crucial diffi-

culty, we are told, "lies in the fact that women seldom can rule, and all but invariably dislike to be ruled by, their own sex."

All ordinary housekeepers are at the mercy of the filth and insolence of a draggle-tailed, novelette-reading feminine democracy. . . . When all the bricklayers' daughters are giving piano-lessons, and it's next to impossible to get any servant except a ladies' maid, we shall see women of leisure develop a surprising interest in the boiling of potatoes.

The problem of problems is, of course, that of marriage; one aspect of it is embodied in the unhappy Cecil Morpew, whose life was ruined by the postponement, for years and years, of marriage with a girl on whom his heart was set—because, as he bitterly says, they "hadn't money enough to take a house three times bigger" than they needed. "If she had married me when she might have done!" he groaned, after she had refused, on moral grounds, to marry him: "*There* was the wrong that led to everything else." The problem disturbing the marital conscience as never before is thus stated: "In acting with masculine decision, with the old-fashioned authority of husbands, [one makes] himself doubly responsible for any misery that might come to [his wife] through the conditions of her life." The experience divulged in the following sentences is calculated to make the judicious pause before abandoning a life of celibacy:

Marriage rarely means happiness, either for man or woman; if it be not too grievous to be borne, one must thank the fates and take courage.

It is common enough for people who have been several years wedded to feel exasperation in each other's presence.

All things considered, the husband who finds it *just* possible to endure the contiguity of his wife . . . must call himself happy.

Mr. Gissing can never hope to be popular with feminine readers. Yet he represents his hero as virtually *saved* by the birth of his son; whereas in his bachelor days he had been worried by the problem of overpopulation, and had raged against the sacrifice of women to the rising generation, he is brought at last to see in parental affection the only thing that makes life worth living, in the training of his child a sufficient object for the remainder of his days, in

the smoothing of its path a sufficient recompense for every sacrifice. He dogmatizes concerning the "enormous obligation" of parents to their children, is absorbed in problems of education and heredity, studies his child with almost painful solicitude, and becomes more pathetically wrapped up in him the more his mother neglects him. It is the gospel according to Evolution, the only significance of "salvation" in its scheme.

A dreary scepticism pervades this society; the men, as a matter of course, are sceptical; the hero

felt glad that no theological or scientific dogma constrained him to a justification of the laws of life.

Both Sibyl and Alma attended church, from habit,

and both would have shrunk amazed if called upon to make the slightest sacrifice in the name of their presumed creed.

"In her normal state of mind Alma prayed for nothing;" and the heathenism of her "religion" is betrayed by her prayers for success, on the eve of her musical ordeal, and "more than once," later, for Sibyl's death.

From this exhibition of worldly intrigue, of sin and sorrow, dealing death, one turns, at the end of the book, with a relief that one is convinced the author shares, to the home of the Mortons in a country town—a haunt of ancient peace. Mrs. Morton is a wife and mother of the old school, a *true* as contrasted with the *new* woman. "Into her pure and healthy mind had never entered a thought at conflict with motherhood." She nurses her children and nurtures them in the love of God and their kind, in gentle accomplishments and innocent recreations. She is aware that there are such things as vulgar altercations and final separations between husbands and wives—but such banal episodes seem to her hopelessly inconsistent with good sense and right feeling. In her own experience she has encountered no conjugal difficulty that did not yield to these qualities, or, in the last resort, to the creed by which she lived—for to her "the will of God" is more than a phrase. It seems natural to her that a married woman should be guided by her husband's wish.

In this character, whether or not he designed to do so, Mr. Gissing has set forth in fair proportions the perfect harmony of nature, humanity, and right reason with true religion. Unwonted consummation of realistic fiction! With a sigh of satisfaction we leave our hero, a much-experienced Ulysses of married life, and his delicate little boy, their trials over, embowered in a haven of rural Anglicanism—the tranquil harbor of the Mortons' garden.

GREENOUGH WHITE.